Call for Papers

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media

"Flying Through the Capitalocene: Hollywood, Aviation and Climate Breakdown"

Editor: Dr Aidan Power (University of Exeter)

The histories of American cinema and flight go largely hand in hand, with less than a decade separating the first film screenings and the Wright Brothers' first successful flight in 1903. Both technologies have long been emblematic of human progress, take people on journeys, diminish distances, and are defiantly modern in scope, yet both meet with a reckoning when confronted with climate breakdown, as the industries that sustain them are forced to justify their outsized carbon footprints. This issue of *Alphaville*: *Journal of Film and Screen Media* posits that from a vantage point high in a plane we can glimpse the breadth of modern US history, one recorded on-screen by an ever-dutiful Hollywood culture industry.

Aerial cinematography, which first appeared in *Wilbur Wright and His Flying Machine* (1909) would revolutionise human perspective and play a significant role in two world wars, while a 1927 recording of Charles Lindbergh's inaugural transatlantic flight to Paris was one of the very first sound films. That same year *Wings*—a celebration of US air power directed by a World War I pilot (William A. Wellman)—won Best Picture at the inaugural Academy Awards. A generation of flight films extolled American exceptionalism during the Second World War, the Cold War, and latterly the space race, while another era still sought to make sense of the nation both before and after 9/11. Nor has this relationship cooled: as recently as 2022, *Top Gun: Maverick* was widely credited with saving a Covid-hit film industry, while simultaneously raising all kinds of questions about the carbon output of both aviation and film production, as well as the US Military's continued influence over Hollywood output.

And yet curiously, while academic studies of aviation and cinema exist, none perhaps having had more impact than Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, scholarship has been slow to place this relationship within the wider contexts of climate breakdown, a gap that this issue seeks to address.

There is a certain synchronicity at play when we consider *Top Gun*'s links with the US military, for Virilio's work helps shed light on the ways that the film industry's vertical reorientation arose in large part due to the same military's need for aerial surveillance during the First World War. In fact, the connection goes back further still, with Luke McKernan raising the possibility that the Wright brothers never filmed their inaugural flight because they wanted to sell their secret invention to the US military. An unintended consequence of their decision, however, as Kevin L. Ferguson notes, was that

it made it even harder for the world to believe such a feat were possible, and it should not surprise us therefore, that from there on out, the presence of filmmakers at major aviation events was considered crucial. In turn, as Robert Wohl points out, director/pilots including Wellman, and latterly Howard Hawks and Howard Hughes soon after popularised the aviation film within Hollywood itself.

While environmental scholars remain divided over when the Anthropocene—the human-made epoch in which we unequally reside—began, we could, should we so choose, date its Great Acceleration to a precise date: 16 July 1945, when the first atomic explosion was carried out by the US army as part of the Manhattan Project in the New Mexico desert. Or perhaps fast forward a month, and consider the events of 6 August 1945, when the US Airforce dropped the first atomic bomb from the Enola Gay on Hiroshima, instantly killing 70,000 people. From this vantage point at least, it all began, and was filmed from a plane. It follows then that all the time an alternative history was being constructed in plain sight, one where the omnipresent spectre of onscreen flight naturalised contemporaneous discourses and inadvertently prefigured an environmentally degraded future. Such is in keeping with Jennifer Fay's pioneering work on cinema history and climate breakdown, which argues that cinema estranges us from our conception of the world and in so doing is, and always has been, the aesthetic practice of the Anthropocene. The entire history of Hollywood it follows can be seen as an inadvertent documenter of the deleterious impact of human activity on the planet. As the cultural wing of US capital moreover, it can be seen more profitably still as documenter of the Capitalocene, a term with origins in the work of Andreas Malm and Jason Moore. As the latter reminds us in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, "the Anthropocene sounds the alarm—and what an alarm it is! But it cannot explain how these alarming changes came about". As a whole host of scholars have pointed out, the climate crisis accordingly necessitates a ruthless reinterrogation of history, as well as of the assumptions that underpin conceptualisations of historical progress. An aim of this issue therefore is to consider American cinema in its entirety from pre-Hollywood to the current day. Planes are useful for sharpening the focus of what is potentially unwieldy subject matter, not least because they provide a readily identifiable symbol of the planetary phenomenon/hyperobject that is the climate crisis, while also serving as microcosmic spaces for modelling behaviours and systems of control, most obviously when it comes to segregating passengers by class, race, or gender.

In material terms, some 120 years after the Wright Brothers first took flight, aviation, like Hollywood itself, remains a defiantly modernist phenomenon that shapes our everyday lives, one that, despite piecemeal attempts to mitigate its carbon impact, contributes hugely to planetary breakdown. Returning to this history and uncovering alternate histories then remains hugely important, as for example, Paula Amad's deconstruction of modernist masculinist myths in the article "Affective Cin-aereality: Women and Aviation in Silent Cinema" reminds us. Moreover, as Farai Chipato and David Chandler note with a nod to Donna Haraway, in their recent monograph *Race in the Anthropocene: Coloniality, Disavowal and the Black Horizon*, "taking the world-making ontological violence of coloniality into account means 'staying with the trouble' of modernity rather than wishing modernity

away or hoping that alternative worlds can be conjured from within this one". Doing so opens up possibilities too, not least if we conceptually broaden the scope of flight itself, and take into account, for example, Michelle D. Commander's observation in *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*, that "flight is transcendence over one's reality—an escape predicated on imagination and the incessant longing to be free".

Flight moreover has always been an intensely cinematic event; witness to give but some examples the fall of Saigon, the Hindenburg disaster, or Amelia Earhart landing in Southampton. Crucially, such high-profile instances of flight are also intensely dialectical, serving as sites of hope and fear that emphasise gaps between mobility and stasis, private and public, and coloniser and colonised that crystallise hegemonic assumptions at key moments in human history, assumptions that everywhere are being resuscitated, respawned, regurgitated and ultimately, reinforced in an epoch where large tracts of the earth are becoming uninhabitable, and flight in all its manifestations becomes ever more stratified. We see it in the ghoulish spectacle of a planeful of dogs being evacuated from Kabul airport, while below helpless Afghans look on. We observe it in celebrity vanity flights into orbit funded by billionaire robber barons, whose carbon footprints outstrip those of entire continents. Or, most gruesomely, we see it play out in the US-funded Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people, a death from above that seeks to destroy a whole population while scorching the very earth that sustains them in a simultaneous act of ecocide.

That such barbarism could happen in plain sight should horrify us, but it should not surprise us, for the inability or outright refusal of Western media to present the world as it really is has long been obvious. As the cultural wing of US hegemony, Hollywood, which literally enshrined white supremacy into its production code, has, with some notable exceptions, historically towed the line. Again, returning to the air is clarifying. Exemplary is the opening scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where archaeologist/thief Indiana Jones steals a native artefact from a Peruvian temple before fleeing an enraged local tribe in a float plane. As the rising aircraft belches fumes into the air, its famous passenger's mobility is juxtaposed against the natives' stasis, his technological mastery trumping their primitive spears. The resultant and by now iconic superimposition of a map over a shot of the plane flying through clouds follows, a visual leitmotif that reinforces Jones' mastery of the air and by proxy naturalises both US hegemony and the white supremacist tenets that America and Hollywood were built upon, and that are today everywhere evident in interrelated neofascist clampdowns on civil rights protests and climate activism. In such contexts it follows that flight, and who has access to it, will become more than ever a matter of life and death.

Returning to the sky, this issue of *Alphaville* will seek to make explicit such connections and unpack interrelated histories of flight, Hollywood and climate breakdown. In so doing, it aims to consider not only how such histories shape our present moment, but also explore how they might offer salutary lessons for, and potentially modes of resistance to, the turbulent futures that lie in store.

Potential topics could include (but are by no means restricted to):

The interconnected histories of flight and Hollywood
Early cinema, flight and environmental degradation
The US Military Complex, Hollywood, flight and climate breakdown
Genocide and Ecocide from above: How the culture industry defends the indefensible
Drones and resistance: disrupting supply chains in the Capitalocene
Intersections between film and aviation industries
From *Airplane!* to *Con Air* to *Snakes on a Plan* to *Zero Hour*. Rethinking genre in the Capitalocene
Dromology, flight, and compressed time in the Capitalocene
Technological advancements in aerial cinematography and shooting a burning planet
White flight and the privatisation of space
Evacuation: Saigon, Kabul, and Hollywood cultural memory
Onscreen aviation labour practices and organising as mode of resistance
Ecofeminist resistance and cinematic flight
Onscreen flight and segregation
Death from above: race, flight, resistance: from Tulsa to Oakland
"Get off my plane!" Revisiting 1990s flight narratives in the era of climate breakdown

Publication Details

Full-length articles: 5,500-7,000 words, including notes but excluding references
Video essay: Approx. 3–15 mins, plus accompanying text 500–1,000 words
Articles and video essays will be subject to full peer review. Guidelines here:
https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Guidelines.html

Publication Timeline

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If you are interested in contributing to this issue, please send a 300-word abstract along with a brief biography to Aidan Power (a.power3@exeter.ac.uk**)**

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